

Sūrah 111

Al-Lahab

(Makkan Period)

Title

The opening verse of this *Sūrah* contains the word *lahab*, which forms its title.

Period of Revelation

All Qur'ānic scholars unanimously regard this *Sūrah* as Makkan. However, it is hard to ascertain the exact phase of the Makkan period in which it was revealed. In view of Abū Lahab's misconduct towards the Prophet (peace be upon him) and Islam, it appears that it must have been revealed when his enmity had crossed all limits and when he stood as a major obstacle to Islam's cause. It is likely, therefore, that it was sent down during the period of social boycott in the valley of Abū Tālib, where the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his family had been forced to stay. For, Abū Lahab was the only member of the Prophet's family who had deserted him and sided with his enemies. As he was the Prophet's uncle, his condemnation could have come into public only when his

hostility to the Prophet had also come to everyone's knowledge. Had this *Sūrah* been revealed at an earlier date, people would have felt outraged at the nephew's condemnation of his uncle.

Circumstantial Setting

This is the only instance in the Qur'ān in which an enemy of Islam is condemned by name. Needless to add, there were many enemies of Islam both in Makkah and Madīnah who were no less hostile to the Prophet (peace be upon him) than Abū Lahab. It naturally raises the question as to why he is reproached by name. For its answer let us take a brief look at the then Arabian society and his role in it.

For a long time, Arabia had been steeped in lawlessness, violence and bloodshed. It had been customary for centuries that only one's family offered protection for one's life, property and honour. For no law and order agency was in place. In the Arab social and moral code, therefore, maintaining ties of kinship had special importance. Severing this link was construed as a major sin. This explains why the Banū Hāshim and Banū al-Muṭṭalib did not oppose the Prophet (peace be upon him), unlike other Quraysh chiefs and families. On the contrary, the former publicly supported him, though many of them did not accept Islam. The Quraysh appreciated their support of him, this being in accordance with the local tradition. Indeed, they did not reproach the Banū Hāshim and Banū Muṭṭalib for lending support to him who had abandoned their ancestral faith. They recognized that they could not and would not hand over a member of their family to the enemy. Such support and protection was natural.

This moral principle, which was regarded as sacred even in *Jāhilīyah* society, was violated only by one person, Abū Lahab ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's real uncle. In Arabian society, uncles enjoyed the same status as fathers, especially in the case of an orphan nephew. Blinded by his opposition to Islam, Abū Lahab, however, disregarded all these traditions of his culture and society.

Many *Ḥadīth* scholars have recorded Ibn 'Abbās's following report, supported by a long chain of narrators, that when the

Prophet (peace be upon him) was commanded to preach Islam publicly and the Qur'ān specifically directed the Prophet (peace be upon him) to warn his kith and kin, he climbed Mount Ṣafā and cried: "O the morning calamity!" This cry was only proclaimed at dawn when someone saw a raiding party about to pounce on a town. On hearing the Prophet's cry, all the Quraysh rushed to him. When all of them had assembled there, he called each of them by name, as for example, the members of Banū Hāshim, Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib and Banū Fihir. He then told them: "Will you believe me if I tell you that an army behind this mountain is about to attack you? When they replied in the affirmative, saying that they had never found him to tell a lie, he then said to them: "I warn you against the impending punishment." Before anyone could respond, Abū Lahab yelled: "Woe on you! Have you assembled us only for this?" A report adds that he had even picked up a stone in order to throw it at the Prophet (peace be upon him), (Aḥmad, Bukhārī, *Bāb al-Tafsīr*, Muslim, Tirmidhī and Ibn Jarīr).

Ibn Zayd reports: "Abū Lahab once asked the Prophet (peace be upon him): "Were I to embrace your faith, what would I gain?" He replied: "The same which all other believers will receive." He further asked whether there was something special in store for him. When the Prophet (peace be upon him) asked him to elaborate, he said: "Cursed be the faith in which I am treated as equal with everybody" (Ibn Jarīr).

Abū Lahab was the Prophet's next door neighbour in Makkah. Their houses were divided by a wall. His other neighbours were Ḥakam ibn 'Āṣ (Marwān's father), 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ait, 'Adī ibn Ḥamrā' and Ibn al-Aṣḍā' al-Hudhalī. They made life difficult for the Prophet (peace be upon him) even in his own home. For example, while he was praying, they threw rubbish inside his house. They did the same when food was being cooked inside the house, the rubbish so polluting it. He even asked them whether such behaviour befitted a neighbour. Abū Lahab's wife, Umm Jamīl, used to put thorny bushes at his door at night so that he and his children would be pricked by thorns, (Bayhaqī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn 'Asākir and Ibn Hishām).

Before his appointment as Messenger, the Prophet's two daughters were married to Abū Lahab's two sons – 'Utbah and

'Utaybah. As the Prophet (peace be upon him) commenced his call to Islam, Abū Lahab asked his sons to divorce them or sever their links with him. Both divorced the Prophet's daughters. 'Utaybah was so ill-mannered that one day he approached the Prophet (peace be upon him), and said that he did not believe in the Qur'ān and tried to spit at him. The Prophet (peace be upon him) prayed: "O Allah! Place him before one of Your beasts." After this incident, 'Utaybah left for Syria along with his father. On the way, they camped at a spot visited by beasts. Abū Lahab asked those present to ensure the safety of his son in view of the Prophet's curse. 'Utaybah was placed in the middle of the group. At night, a tiger appeared and devoured 'Utaybah. (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb*; Ibn Hajar, *al-Iṣābah*; al-Iṣfahānī, *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah*, and al-Suhaylī, *al-Rawḍ al-Unf*.) There is some divergence of opinion on the date of these divorces – was it after the Prophet's elevation as Messenger or after the revelation of *Sūrah al-Lahab*? As 'Utah embraced Islam after the conquest of Makkah, it was 'Utaybah who was devoured by the tiger.

When 'Abd Allāh, the Prophet's other son, died, far from sympathizing with the Prophet (peace be upon him), Abū Lahab rushed to the Quraysh chiefs, gladly announcing that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had turned *abtar*. We have already discussed this point in our Introduction to *Sūrah al-Kawthar*.

Whenever the Prophet (peace be upon him) went to preach Islam, Abū Lahab followed him and asked the people not to pay any attention to him. Rabī'ah ibn 'Abbād al-Dīlī reports: "When I was a young boy I went to Dhū al-Majāz market along with my father. I saw there the Prophet (peace be upon him) telling everyone: 'O people, say that there is no god besides Allah. You will attain success.' A person, however, followed him, crying: 'He is a liar and has abandoned his ancestral faith.' On enquiry I learnt that he was Abū Lahab, the Prophet's uncle," (Aḥmad and Bayhaqī). Rabī'ah relates: "I saw the Prophet (peace be upon him) visiting the camps of tribes and telling them: 'O so and so, I am Allah's Messenger unto you. I advise you to worship the One True God alone and not to associate anyone with Him. You should testify to me and assist me so that I may accomplish the mission entrusted

to me by Allah.' He was followed by a person who said: "O so and so, this man wants to drive you away from Lāt and al-'Uzzā and to make you commit innovation and error which permeate his teachings. Do not listen to him at all and do not follow him.' I asked my father about the identity of that person, who told me: 'He is his uncle, Abū Lahab,'" (Aḥmad and Ṭabarānī). Ṭāriq ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Muḥāribī has related an identical report. His account is as follows: "I saw in Dhū al-Majāz market the Prophet (peace be upon him) telling people: 'O people, say: There is no god beside Allah. You will attain success.' He was followed by a person who threw stones at him, as a result of which his ankles were bleeding. He kept saying: 'This man, (i.e. the Prophet (peace be upon him)), is a liar. Do not listen to him.' When I enquired about him, I was told that he was his uncle, Abū Lahab," (Tirmidhī).

In the seventh year of the Prophet's mission, when the Quraysh imposed the social and economic boycott of Banū Hāshim and Banū Muṭṭalib, they stood by the Prophet (peace be upon him) and were similarly confined to the Abū Ṭālib valley. Among the Prophet's family, it was only Abū Lahab who supported the Quraysh and betrayed the Prophet (peace be upon him). This boycott lasted for three years, forcing the Prophet's extended family to starve. Abū Lahab was so mean and hard-hearted that during this boycott as a trade caravan arrived and was approached by a member of the Prophet's family for buying food, he asked the trader to sell it at an exorbitant rate which the buyer could not afford. Later Abū Lahab used to compensate the trader for not having sold goods to the Prophet's family. As a result, the buyer had to return empty-handed to his starving children (Ibn Sa'd and Ibn Hishām).

So, such was Abū Lahab who is reproached by name in this *Sūrah*. As he used to tell lies about the Prophet (peace be upon him) publicly, it was necessary that he be exposed. Otherwise, in line with the Arab social code, it was unthinkable that one's uncle would oppose one publicly. People were liable to be swayed by such opposition. However, after the revelation of this *Sūrah*, which enraged him, people recognized that his opposition to his nephew was baseless and that he had turned almost mad out of spite for him.

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Moreover, this public condemnation put an end to the hope that the Prophet (peace be upon him) would ever accept any compromise on the issue of faith. Since even the Prophet's uncle was publicly humiliated, no one else stood a chance of being spared. In matters of faith, total strangers may turn into near and dear ones while kith and kin may change into foes. In essence, then, one's family connection has no bearing on faith.